

The Clipper Visits... Jane Flavell Collins

By ELLEN SHEIL



Jane Flavell Collins

Her energy and sense of humor warm the room right away. Jane Flavell Collins of Rachel's Lane is an artist who truly enjoys people. She takes a visitor past a mural of Thanksgiving Day, which hangs above the 18th century fireplace in her kitchen, where the figures are so real they seem to reach out to the viewer. Her skill as a courtroom sketch artist, however, is what truly distinguishes her ability. She is able to quickly capture facial characteristics, body language, and attitude in busy courtrooms. Her sketches are used by major TV stations to give the public a peek into the courtroom, particularly since cameras are often not allowed. In effect, Collins has made the leap between possessing a fine talent and turning it into an income-producing business. These days she is constantly in demand, and the names of government officials, criminals, and prominent judges roll off her tongue with ease.

"It always came easily to me," Collins muses when asked about her artistic ability. "I could always draw faces." She comments that her older sister was the "artist" of the family, and that as a youngster, the family really didn't take her own efforts seriously. "They always thought I was just imitating her," notes Collins with a smile, "I'd follow her around with my pencils and paper." Her sister, 11 years older, has had her own artistic career.

Collins followed her own interests, however, and attended Massachusetts College of Art in Boston on a scholarship sponsored by Cardinal Cushing. At the end of the courses, she wrote to Cushing to thank him for the scholarship and to ask for any future consideration for art schools that he or the diocese might be aware of. In the mean time, she was accepted at Yale graduate school to continue her art studies. To her complete surprise, several months later a letter from the Cardinal arrived, and Collins learned of a program sponsored by Rosary College held at Villa Schifanoia in Florence, Italy, where she would receive her Master of Fine Arts degree, in-depth artistic training, and have a chance to experience some of the world's greatest artworks. It meant giving up the Yale degree, but Collins says, "I've never, ever regretted not going." She laughs when she adds, "You know, all that time in Italy, and even though I went to Rome 3 times, I never got to see the Sistine Chapel."

Following an exciting year in Italy, Collins began teaching art in Rockland and Hingham. "I loved it," she says with characteristic enthusiasm, "and I ended up being named Teacher of the Year."

Collins spent her summers sketching portraits on the Cape, where she learned to capture the sitter's personality in a few strokes and found she was easily able to get an instant likeness. "I've heard it's a rare talent," she comments, "but for me it came easily." She was once hired by a local savings bank to do portraits of customers who opened savings accounts with \$100. "And those people had kids!" she laughs, describing how quickly she had to work to stay ahead of the crowd.

Once her 3 sons were grown, Collins explored other ways to continue her art. In 1976, a mutual friend suggested she call Jim Thistle at WCVB-TV (Channel 5) in Boston. "I stayed up all night and drew from *Time* magazine," she says. "I drew tiny, tiny pictures of Patrick Moynahan because he was in the news that week, and any vignettes of people in groups I could find. I had no idea how big the pictures could be. I went into Boston on a Friday with my sketches expecting nothing.

Then, Monday morning I got a call at 8:30 am asking if I could be in Boston by 9:00 to do courtroom sketches for the trial of the Boston School Committee member who was accused of taking kickbacks. My first assignment! I got to the Superior Court at Government Center with my pastels, my paper, and my drawing board—all kinds of things that were bulky and heavy. Because I was late, I had to pass in front of a row of reporters already involved in the trial." As she describes it, she edged by, her equipment bumping along, getting annoyed looks from the reporters. She eventually found a seat at the end of the row, but realized she couldn't see the proceedings. In desperation, she spotted a seat that appeared empty across the room, so she gathered her things, passed once again in front of the row of engrossed reporters, and sat down in the new location, putting her drawing things out and preparing to sketch. "A shadow appeared over me," she laughs. "The Officer of the Court looked down at me and in a big masculine voice told me in no uncertain terms that I was in the defendant's seat." She moved again and completed the pictures, her first attempt at courtroom art finally complete.

In the days before television and video cameras, the role of the courtroom sketch artist was essential. Without a sketch of the proceedings, the public had limited views of even minor trials, and the attention given to major criminal proceedings demanded some kind of graphic representation. The recent trials involving O.J. Simpson and Louise Woodward helped to emphasize the role of cameras in the courtroom, and occurred after legislation ruling where and when cameras in courtrooms are allowed. In state courtrooms, cameras can generally be used. In federal trials or hearings, the judge must rule on whether or not to allow cameras. The demand for good court sketch artists is still high, Collins comments. Often, she will be part of a group of artists, each one working for a different news source. "We compare notes," she says. "Someone will ask if the defendant had on a gray jacket, or whether the nose was a certain shape. We have only a short time to capture the likeness, and it's hard to be accurate in every detail." At an arraignment, for instance, Collins said she'll have less than 5 minutes to do a sketch, generally without using color. She adds the color later, and the reporter's story is read as the station films her picture.

Body language is another important subtlety in her drawings. "You want to suggest how their testimony is going," she notes, pointing to a recent drawing of former governor Weld testifying at the James "Whitey" Bulger hearings. "See how he's leaning forward a little, and the

attorney questioning him is intense, leaning in a bit?" Collins normally sketches in the areas of the picture that will stay the same throughout the trial, such as the judge on the bench, and then uses the same sheet of paper with new characters in the witness chair by erasing out the last participant.

Collins pointed out that she has refined her equipment to fewer items over the years, and that her most valuable pieces are a black towel and a wet washcloth. She keeps her pastels, quite a few flesh and blue tones, in a Rubbermaid container with a tight seal. Drawing quick sketches in pastels, which are chalky and dusty, means containing the picture, but Collins said she works from any direction: from top or from bottom. Fixative can be used to keep the picture from smearing, but Collins said she tries not to use it since it affects the color. "I use it along the bottom of a sketch," she notes, "but try not to use it on the main picture." She says she enjoys working with pastels, but that some of her fellow courtroom artists are using markers to color in or complete their pictures. She showed a visitor pieces of vine charcoal that she uses to do her initial sketches, odd looking dark sticks the color of charcoal briquettes.

A typical assignment for one of the major Boston television stations involved sketching the courtroom proceedings from 9-1 pm. At mid-morning, she follows her reporter to the filming area, where her drawing appears on camera as support for the reporter's commentary. "They always seem to use the less-finished sketches," Collins said. "There I'd be trying to color in my preliminary charcoal sketch and finish the details, and they'd show the sketch." She added, "I always try to put the flag in. It's good color, and it adds a little legal tone." She's been told not to include personal details in pictures she draws of the jury, particularly if the trial is an important one and the judge prefers that the jury be anonymous.

Collins catalogs her court sketches in groups and is easily able to locate the drawings from a particular trial. She records the date and the person's name at the bottom of each. Glancing through her work, there are pictures of notable criminals: Pamela Smart, the Brinks Truck Robbery perpetrators, and some famous Mafia faces. "They don't look like violent people when they're in the courtroom," she said. "I sit right near them, and once one of the men in a mob trial looked over at my drawings and gave me a compliment!" Sometimes, she noted, it's hard to know just what the reporter will want to show, so she will do a sketch of several of the important participants in the courtroom in case they are needed.

For relaxation, Collins enjoys her family's home in

Maine, landscape painting, and comparing notes with her sister, Constance Flavell Pratt, who is also a courtroom artist and an art professional. She also manages the work of photographer Clint Clemens, an internationally known advertising photographer. Collins recently finished reading *A Civil Action*, the non-fiction book based on the Woburn leukemia cases, and is looking forward to seeing the new movie being made from the book.

What does this 3-time National Academy Emmy winner and Peabody Award recipient do when a picture just isn't going well? "Oh, I just start over," Collins laughs, making her remarkable talent sound as easy as a flick of the wrist.